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Edwin Wong

### **Is Eteocles in Aeschylus's *Seven against Thebes* a Capable Leader?—The Siege with a Single Casualty**

Hello everyone, thanks for coming. I'm Edwin Wong, a theatre researcher from Canada. I specialize in the theory of tragedy and I've created one called "risk theatre" that makes risk the dramatic fulcrum of the action. It's launched an international playwriting competition, now in its fourth year, check it out at [risktheatre.com](http://risktheatre.com).

Today, I'm here to rehabilitate Aeschylus's *Seven against Thebes*. This is the play that drew me into the classics decades ago. I found it quite by chance and though it was the best ever. I finally cracked *why* it's so fantastic, and I'm here today to share my vision with you. By the way, Theater in Greece and Rome (TIGR) is performing a staged reading of *Seven* Thursday. Check it out.

You know, Aeschylus was a soldier who distinguished himself in the four major engagements of the Persian Wars, from Marthon to Artemisium, Salamis, and Plataea. On his epitaph, he doesn't even mention anything about playwriting: it only records his valour in the grove of Marathon. A type of person such as this, I would expect, when writing a martial play, would create a portrait of an effective and patriotic leader.

Not only that, Aristophanes remembers in *Frogs* that *Seven* inspired audiences "hot to be warlike." Now, if Eteocles was perceived to be a bumbling idiot, it would be hard to see how it would have inspired audiences "hot to be warlike."

Let's take a look at how Eteocles lays down his masterclass in patriotism. In his opening words, he says:

For if we win success, the God is the cause  
but if—may it not chance so—there is disaster,  
throughout the town, voiced by its citizens,  
a multitudinous swelling prelude  
cries on one name "Eteocles" with groans.

His asymmetric "heads the god wins; tails Eteocles loses" heuristic seems confused. Shouldn't it follow that, if the gods take credit, the gods also take blame? This happens in other cultures. In *The Golden Bough*, James George Frazer records how, when there was a disastrous six-month draught, the Sicilians abused the statue of Saint Angelo, their patron rainmaker, stripping him, reviling him, putting him in irons, and drowning and hanging him. In another example, he records how praise and blame is symmetric in the Far East where the Chinese would, by imperial decree, elevate compliant gods to higher levels of godhead and strip recalcitrant gods of their divinity.

I think that what Eteocles realizes is that an effective leader cannot transfer the risk of failure to others. Risk must be asymmetric. Take a look at what happens in the *Iliad* where Agamemnon, while apologizing to Achilles for inciting their ruinous quarrel, transfers the blame to Zeus, Fate, and the Erinyes. "They made me do it," he says. It is a daft apology; Achilles spits

it out. So too, when, facing mounting losses, Agamemnon points his finger at Zeus. Now it may be true that it happens by the will of Zeus, but, you can't say that.

So, Eteocles—unlike Agamemnon—by holding himself responsible, aligns himself with his constituents' interests. In other words, he has skin in the game. The principle of skin in the game find is that, to succeed, one must be invested in the successful outcome. Skin in the game is a concept from the business world, where it was observed that startups where the founders invested their own seed money were more likely to succeed. For example: want to create the world's most successful theatre company?—well, make Shakespeare and Richard Burbage your shareholders. The skin in the game idea caught my attention when mathematician, philosopher, and trader Nassim Nicholas Taleb elevated the idea into a way of life in his 2018 New York Times bestselling book *Skin in the Game*. When I read it, it occurred to me that this is the policy Eteocles is pursuing.

To see how skin in the game works, look at the chorus. They're in a panic. They come to the acropolis to prostrate themselves on the gods' altars. "Zeus, Father Omnipotent! all fulfilling!" says the chorus, "Let us not fall into the hands of the foeman!" "Do not betray this city," says the chorus. As the chorus prays, Eteocles rebukes them, calling them "insupportable creatures" and "an object of hatred." Why the harsh words? The chorus protests. They have done nothing wrong. They were afraid. They ran to the altars. Their actions fall in line with custom.

Skin in the game can explain Eteocles's exasperation. Take a look at another prayer—from Marlowe's play—when the great magician Faustus, having achieved world dominion, at perhaps too high a price, looks for another way. He calls on God. "I do repent," he says, "and yet I do despair." Like the chorus's prayers saying "Grant me not be a slave" and "do not betray the city," these are negative prayers lacking skin in the game. They are the prayers, like Faustus' of someone who is already defeated.

Eteocles gives them a better prayer, one that motivates people and gods by promising them a share of the victory. The new prayer invokes the gods as the city's allies, a joyous paean of thanksgiving promising them hearths abounding with sacrificial animals and altars adorned with spoils. The chorus get it: from singing the fall of Thebes at the beginning, by the time the action moves to the sixth gate, they are calling on Zeus to "strike down and slay the foe."

It shouldn't really make a difference whether you have skin. When Agamemnon says it was Zeus, you know, he was correct. And if you're a playwright, it shouldn't really matter if you're a shareholder: you try your best to do your job, right? Well, wrong. It's not logic that counts because we're not machines. We're humans and we're wired a certain way that having skin in the game works. What *Seven* suggests is that patriotism is a behaviour, and if you start looking at a behaviour logically, it doesn't work. To analyze behaviour, look at the biological basis of behaviour as an inherited trait conditioned by natural selection.

Consider, now, another logical anomaly: how Eteocles polarizes attackers and defenders into a binary "us and them." While the defenders are nurtured by the motherland, honour the "throne of Modesty," and enjoy the favour of the Olympian gods, the attackers stand ready to "strike like a serpent," abuse one another, speak blasphemy against the gods, and carry on their devices images of night and darkness. In an insult to fact checkers, they even call the attackers a "foreign-tongued enemy." What is more, Eteocles takes the binary "us and them" mentality and asks his constituents to take a side. Talk about divisive. Why does he do this?

If patriotism is a social behaviour, then it probably can be observed in other times and other species. You can see this behaviour in the social insects. In times of prosperity, honeybees are tolerant of bees from neighbouring hives entering their nests and borrowing supplies. In

times of dearth, however, they attack every intruder at the gate. Anthropologists have identified in early hunter-gatherers evidence of a binary mentality cleaving sapiens into in- and out-group members. The Nyae Nyae, for example, a group of !Kung hunter-gatherers living in the Kalahari Desert “speak of themselves as perfect and clean and other !Kung people as alien murderers who use deadly poisons.”

This is where I turn to biologist E. O. Wilson’s theory of sociobiology where he posits that human behaviours, being encoded in the genes, have been selected through the long process of evolution. Reason and logic is a relatively new thing. These feelings of territoriality are a more ancient device, seeing that the behaviour of territoriality can be traced back from humanity all the way back to the social insects. Kinship is an old thing that ties together groups through behaviours and customs. We see it in the patronymic: by calling the defenders the “son of Astacus,” “Creon’s son,” or the “son of Oenops” Eteocles shames his defenders to at least equal their fathers. Skin in the game and patriotism may be, speculates Wilson, a behavior encoded into our genes through eons of evolution, allowing the animals who exhibited such impulses to multiply.

Though a valuable behaviour, patriotism or territoriality comes with pros and cons. Take Lasthenes, the defender at the sixth gate, who is described, positively, by Eteocles as being *echthro Xenos*, or “hateful to strangers.” He is useful. But how useful is he in a time of peace? We can see in Lasthenes, how patriotism, being a hypertrophy and cultural outgrowth of an innate tribalism that unites kin groups into bands, can go too far. Here’s the issue: too little patriotism, and Thebes falls. Too much and nationalism and racism rise, stalling the spread of culture and information. A character such as Lasthenes walks a thin line. Being “hateful to strangers” he is an effective sentry. But what happens when the siege is lifted?

To sum up, I’ve looked at *Seven* through the concept of *skin in the game*, an idea found in political and economics discourse. By giving the chorus skin in the game, Eteocles unites the war effort inside the city. That this is an example of successful generalship can be seen by comparing what’s going on outside the gates with the attackers, who hurl insults at one another. I’ve also looked at *Seven* through a sociobiological lens. Sociobiology argues that patriotism and territoriality is a behaviour. By activating this behaviour, Eteocles mobilizes the defence of the home range. None of these tactics is logical. But then, human biology is illogical, an archaeology of many behaviours accumulated over an evolutionary timespan that’s hard to imagine.

*Seven*, by dramatizing patriotism highlights the advantages and disadvantages of biology. It is a most crucial play, as it provides a springboard into a broader discussion of patriotism, leadership, nationalism, and other critical issues we face in the twenty-first century: the problem of how to build a space age society from genes adapted to Stone and Heroic Age environments.

And, to get back to the original question: is Eteocles a capable general? By giving the defenders skin in the game and creating a divisive “us and them” heuristic he carries the day, raises the siege and destroys the enemy at the cost of only one casualty. Not good. But not bad, either. Just all too human.

**If you’ve enjoyed this talk, be sure to check out my new book: *When Life Gives You Risk, Make Risk Theatre: Three Tragedies and Six Essays*. Coming out early 2022.**

*Creators, Innovators, and Theatremakers:*  
DEFY THE SMALLNESS OF THE STAGE  
WITH THE GREATNESS OF YOUR DARING

Wong's first book upended tragic literary theory by arguing that risk is the dramatic fulcrum of the action. It also launched an international playwriting competition (risktheatre.com). His second book expands on how chance directs the action, both on and off the stage.

Inside you will find three risk theatre tragedies by acclaimed playwrights: *In Bloom* (Gabriel Jason Dean), *The Value* (Nicholas Dunn), and *Children of Combs and Watch Chains* (Emily McClain). From the poppy fields of Afghanistan to the motel rooms and doctors' offices lining interstate expressways, these plays—by simulating risk—will show you how theatre is a dress rehearsal for life.

Six risk theatre essays round off this volume. In a dazzling display from Aeschylus to Shakespeare, Thomas Hardy, and Arthur Miller, Wong reinterprets theatre through chance and probability theory. After risk theatre, you will never look at literature in the same way.

TOMORROW, WHOEVER SAYS DRAMA WILL SAY RISK

Edwin Wong (1974-) is a classicist and theatre researcher specializing in the impact of the highly improbable. He has been invited to talk at venues from the Kennedy Center and the University of Coimbra in Portugal to international conferences held by the National New Play Network, the Canadian Association of Theatre Research, the Society of Classical Studies, and the Classical Association of the Middle West and South. His first book, *The Risk Theatre Model of Tragedy*, is igniting an international arts movement. He was educated at Brown University and lives in Victoria, Canada. Follow him on [melpomeneswork.com](http://melpomeneswork.com) and Twitter @TheoryOfTragedy.

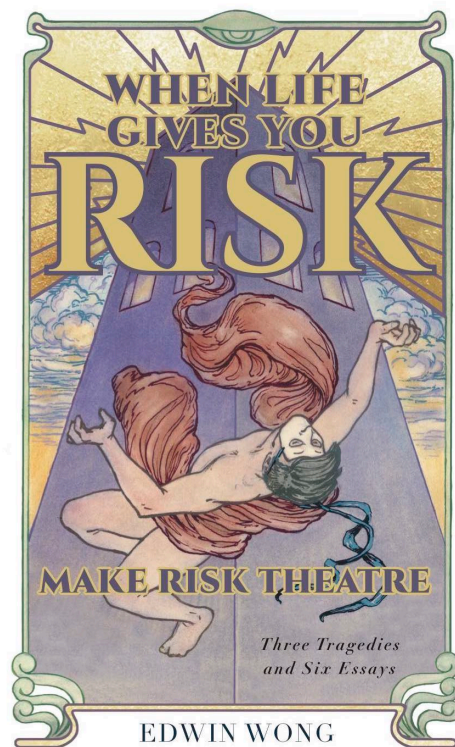


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## Original Abstract:

### Eteocles's Patriotic Response in Aeschylus's *Seven against Thebes*

Aeschylus gives the audience, in his character of Eteocles, a portrait of an effective and patriotic leader. As a soldier who distinguished himself in the four major engagements of the Persian Wars, from Marathon (where his brother Cynegirus perished), to Artemisium, Salamis, and Plataea, Aeschylus knew of effective leadership. Furthermore, sixty-two years after *Seven against Thebes* was first produced, audiences still remembered it for its patriotism: in Aristophanes's *Frogs*, the fictional Aeschylus says that every single person who watched *Seven against Thebes* "was hot to be warlike" (1019–22). Unless Eteocles was perceived to be an effective and patriotic leader, it would have been unlikely that the play could have inspired audiences "hot to be warlike."

Eteocles's treatment of the chorus of Theban women has been seen as questionable at best, and misogynistic at worst. Through a concept recently popularized by philosopher, mathematician, and essayist Nassim Nicholas Taleb called "skin in the game," I will argue that Eteocles pursues a patriotic and effective strategy in his debate with the chorus (Taleb 2018). By investing the chorus with "skin in the game"—involving them with a share in the victory—Eteocles moves them away from their negative prayers (e.g. "May the enemy not slaughter us") to positive forms of prayer (e.g. "May the gods strike down our enemies"). His is a patriotic and effective strategy.

Eteocles's reduction of the Argive attackers into the "other" may also seem counterintuitive to modern notions of humanizing and understanding the enemy. Through the lens of sociobiology, a scientific discipline grounding human nature in biological origins proposed by biologist E. O. Wilson in the 1970s, I will argue that, by reducing the enemy into the "other," Eteocles activates primal and deep-seated behaviours of territoriality in the defenders (Wilson 1978). It is an ambivalent strategy that anthropologists can identify in cultures today from the Nyae Nyae and !Kung Bushmen to various fringe groups.

I will conclude by talking about how Aeschylus's *Seven against Thebes*, in promoting the behaviour of patriotism, simultaneously highlights the problem of patriotism: too little patriotism and society fragments but, too much patriotism, and nationalism and racism rise, stalling the spread of culture and information. A character such as Lathenes walks a thin line. Being "hateful to strangers" (*Echthroxenos*, 621), he is an effective sentry. His value, in peacetime, however, is debatable.

Patriotism highlights the limitation of biology, the problem of how to build a space age society from genes adapted to Stone and Heroic Age environments. *Seven against Thebes* is a most crucial play, as it provides a springboard into a broader discussion of patriotism, leadership, nationalism, and other critical issues we face in the twenty-first century.

#### Bibliography

Taleb, Nassim Nicholas. *Skin in the Game: Hidden Asymmetries in Daily Life*. Random House, 2018

Wilson, E. O. *On Human Nature*. Harvard UP, 1978